

THE MYSTIC POETRY OF THE SUFIS

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Sufism had existed a long time before it was codified and recorded in writing. For more than ten centuries, the tradition was passed orally, from mouth to ear. Circumstances were unfavorable later on when an attempt was made to record it. The Sufis were surrounded by so many hostile and malevolent sects that they preferred to express themselves through symbol and metaphor. Often interpreted in different ways, these have always brought about great confusion and innumerable misunderstandings.

The chief reason that ever stood in the way of the Sufis' declaring boldly their conviction was that Sufism is essentially individualistic and therefore incompatible with established religions. Every religion tries to subdue the individuality of the believer, to dissolve it through slavish obedience that allows of no protest, thereby making of its follower an object rather than a being. All practices are dictated, and there is no room for free choice. All prescriptions must be followed without reflection, or, when reflection is allowed, it cannot go beyond the text established by the divine legislator.

Sufism, on the contrary, invites and prepares its votaries to attain the highest degree of purification. One who reaches that highest stage no longer needs any guide. The greatest degree of purification being the image of God, one who attains it has himself become divine in the fullest meaning of that word and, as such, has become his own divinity. Thus, it is that one of the great martyrs of Sufism was executed because he had dared to say, "I am God," another was brave enough to say, "There is only God within this garment."

The Sufis were compelled to express themselves by hints, to preach under cover, and even to hold secret gatherings; they lived far away from urban centers. Yet they needed votaries. They had to be initiated; they had to be prepared and directed so that they might realize divinity. The method employed by the Sufis to reach this end is subtle and ingenious. They created a sort of moral hierarchy that we find already in Manichaeism and that took a more rudimentary form in certain Christian churches and especially in Roman Catholicism. Among the Christians, one can begin by becoming a simple priest and then ascend, grade by grade, until one may reach ultimately the dignity of the Pope.

Among the Manichees, this privilege was not reserved to the elect or to those who entered the clerical profession; any one was qualified to enter the community as a Listener -- this was the designation among them. The Listener then had but to follow the necessary prescriptions to ascend step by step. Each stage in an inferior rank allowed him to pass into the next grade, exactly as in an army, until he arrived at the last or seventh stage when he was liberated from all obligations, becoming his own shepherd and flock. Manichaeism differed from other religions in that this was possible without distinctions of birth, caste, or even of canonical teaching.

The Sufis adopted the same method but presented it in a much more poetical form. This form of Sufism inspired Dante in his *DIVINE COMEDY*, Milton in his *PARADISE LOST*, and Swift in his *SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY*. The poetical explanation of the Iranian Sufis is even more refined. I shall mention some of the prototypes.

The great poet Sanai presents the ascent of the soul in the following manner. The soul wishes to ascend to heaven in order to reach perfection. Like any traveler, it takes provisions for this long ascent of seven stages. Please note that the number seven is classical among the Manichees and has been faithfully retained by the Sufis. The soul thus commences its voyage and, as it gradually ascends, it realizes more and more the futility of its provisions that are cumbersome and useless to one who is becoming more and more ethereal, less and less corporeal, and who can therefore do with less and less luggage. At each stage, the soul discards some blemish, some defect, some passion, some sensual pleasure, exactly as the crew of a boat may jettison its cargo when in danger or as a man in a balloon may have to get rid of his load in order to be able to reach his destination.

In the same manner, the soul reaches perfection. It has detached itself from not only the equivalent of the seven capital sins of European authors, but also from every corporeal and material tie with the earth. The Sufis designate this as the degree of complete destitution, leading to unification.

Another great Iranian poet, Attar, gives an even more symbolic explanation of a remarkable subtlety. A group of birds, having heard of a fabulous bird, formed themselves into a caravan to go to visit the object of their envy and to try to follow its example. In this caravan, each bird is the symbol of a blemish; thus, the parrot symbolizes gossip, the hoopoe (a bird with a crest) stands for fatuity, the cock for voluptuousness, the crow for theft, the owl for malevolence, and so on. The poet first gives us the portrait of all these and makes them speak to reveal their own nature. Then the birds begin their ascent towards the perfect being, whose example they aspire to follow.

Here again we have seven regions that must be traversed. The journey is hard; each stage sees some of the birds, exhausted with fatigue, finding themselves unable to continue the trip and remaining behind. All blemishes, since they cannot ascend, must be discarded until only one being reaches the goal.

There he finds only a tiny fairy corner, full of flowers, of fruits, and of all the beauty that one can imagine. At the center of this veritable paradise, the traveler sees only a surface of water -- he has been told that it is here that the fabulous bird resides, but when he approaches, he sees only his own image reflected in the water! Then he realizes that perfection was all along within himself. To go through the seven difficult stages which had to be traversed, it was only necessary to get rid of all that was an encumbrance and superfluous. When he had thus completely purified himself, he had become the perfect being whom he had sought and whose example he had wished to follow.

The Iranian Sufis have explained their doctrine in this manner. The most ingenious manner, as also the safest, that they adopted to convert the people was that of symbolic poetry. That is why poetry was cultivated to such an extent and attained such richness among the Iranian Sufis. In fact, one can say that nearly all great Iranian Sufis have been poets, as also that all poets have been Sufis, the latter sometimes unconsciously to themselves.

In the poetry of the Iranian Sufis, symbolism attains an incomparable wealth; it achieves a remarkable variety. Not only has carnal love been sung in flattering terms but also, while Islam reigned supreme, the poets praised Hindu pagodas as also the tabernacles of the Christians, the synagogue of the Jews and, still more remarkable, they praised even the cabaret of the Zoroastrian Magi. A few, among them the great Hafiz, even sing the praises of the Fire of Zoroaster. Thus, it is that poetry, whether lyrical, bacchanal, or even erotic, reached the highest

degree of perfection among the Iranian Sufis.

In spite of all the anathemas directed against them by Mohammedan priestcraft, which looks upon them even today as heretics, the Sufis had great eras in all Mohammedan countries, in North Africa, Syria, Arabia, Turkey, and in Central Asia. This was especially true in India and Iran, where they are still most numerous. The Sufis have always been the refuge of superior spirits and freethinkers.

The most picturesque aspect of Sufism, as also the most significant, is its striking liberalism, which evinced itself at a period when the whole of humanity was poisoned by divisions of class, caste, race, and religion. Among Sufis, all individuals, irrespective of religion or sect, are regarded as absolutely equal. The great Sufi leaders accepted among their disciples, and even into their intimate circle, Jews, Christians, idolaters, Zoroastrians, and Mohammedans -- the last with no distinction among the sects of Islam. The Sufis of India have had among their votaries Hindus as well as Mohammedans. The Islam of the Sufis is an Islam absolutely spiritual, that is, a philosophical principle and not a ritual. That is why the Sufis have never preached any specific religious observance or recommended any special worship or prayer.

One can therefore say that Sufism has always been something beyond and above religion -- a superior ideal, a philosophical teaching, which looks upon the whole of humanity as equal, without distinctions of race, of faith, of sect, of clan, of caste, or of class. The great Sufi leaders always made the beggar sit next to the prince, a child next to a venerable old man. Respect was accorded only based on the length of time since one had joined the circle of Sufis and on that of the number of personal mortifications and sacrifices undertaken and practiced under the patronage and the spiritual guidance of the head of the fraternity.

The Sufi sects, although very numerous, never had any divergence of views among themselves; this because the basic principles were identical for all and the question of spiritual exercises was considered of secondary importance. Successorship was hereditary; that is, the chief himself, while still alive, chose among his disciples the one most worthy to succeed him upon his death. The only prerogative of the chief consisted in a robe and in an asanna or carpet for prayer, and these were handed down from one to the other. The robe was not replaced, or it would have lost its sacred character; as it became worn, it was mended, and in fact, a very old and very much mended robe brought out even better the characteristic teaching of Sufism that forbids attachment to material goods.

Thus, one can consider Sufism as one of the most wholesome philosophies of humanity. Sufism existed, at least in Iran, long before Islam.

In spite of the wealth of Sufi literature in Persian, in Arabic, in Urdu, and even in Turkish, it is still difficult to define Sufi philosophy. This is because of its inexplicable subtlety and because the Sufis, having been surrounded by hostile and malevolent people, had to explain their teaching through symbols. These brought into existence later on an impressionist type of poetry of considerable value that has to its credit four centuries of existence.

I hope that I have succeeded in giving you an elementary outline of Sufism -- I say elementary, because I have had to avoid the use of all technical terminology that would have remained incomprehensible to all who are not specialists in the subject.